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AUTHOR Olson, Keith W.
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ABSTRACT

The U.S. attitude toward Finland during the Cold War years reveals much about U.S. society and politics. In particular, the war between Finland and the Soviet Union during 1939 and 1940 (Finnish Winter War) and the way in which the United States reacted to it at the time and in the years following World War II has relevance for better understanding of U.S. foreign policy and politics. The first part of this paper examines the Finnish Winter War and the U.S. reaction as historians have treated the matter. Postwar presidents have justified a number of foreign policy actions by pointing to the dangers of appeasement. They often have used the September 1938 Munich Conference as such an example. In analyzing this Cold War rhetoric, it is argued that if presidents wanted a sharp contrast between good and evil they could have found no better example than the Finnish Winter War. However, postwar presidents have avoided mention of the Winter War, and even mention of Finland. Four arguments are made as to why this has been the case. (DB)

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Keith W. Olson
University of Maryland

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"United States Historians, Cold War Rhetoric, and The Finnish Winter War"

Keith W. Olson
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American historians have written about the Finnish Winter War from several, but not all, perspectives.[1] With one exception, those who have written have taken a narrow approach. Noticeably lacking is a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the war on the evolution and conduct of American foreign policy in the broad setting of the World War II era, from the 1930's through most of the Cold War.

On the surface, a history of the Winter War seems uncomplicated. On November 30, 1939, the Soviet Union unleashed its army, navy, and air force against Finland; a contest between a totalitarian nation of 180 million persons and a democratic country of 3.9 million inhabitants. After 105 days of winter combat, the unveven match ended with an armistice and with large Finnish concessions. As European wars go, the Finnish Winter War proved short in duration and straight forward in terms of settlement. Rarely has an international conflict exhibited such clear-cut lines of innocence and guilt. In reality, every decision Finnish leaders made, from the spring of 1938 until the armistice of 1940, involved consideration of complex

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[1] No American, for example, has attempted a study based on Finnish sources.

contemporary European conditions and assessment of wide historical patterns. In writing about the Winter War, therefore, historians face problems more difficult than in writing of the longer Continuation War, June 1941 to September 1944, that coincided with much of World War II.

I

American historians have an easier assignment than Finnish historians when writing about the impact of the war on their countries, but American historians, nevertheless, have differed in their conclusions. This is particularly true regarding the impact of the war on American isolationism, the subject of Robert Sobel's book, THE ORIGINS OF INTERVENTIONISM: THE UNITED STATES AND THE RUSSO-FINNISH WAR. Sobel concludes that during the Winter War, "the basic positions of isolationist and internationalist were examined, attacked, found wanting and, to a degree, discarded." The war, he continues, "was an important milestone in the turn to interventionism." [2] Selig Adler, the profession's senior authority on isolationism when Sobel's book appeared, disagreed. He believed that Sobel was "prone to over simplification," that the realignment of isolationists and interventionists was "ephemeral," and that "the Finnish crisis

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[2] Robert Sobel, THE ORIGINS OF INTERVENTIONISM: THE UNITED STATES AND THE RUSSO-FINNISH WAR (New York: Bookman Associates, 1960), pp. 177,183-184.

was a prototype for future inaction."[3]

David L. Porter, who utlilized "a case-study approach," in his THE SEVENTY-SIXTH CONGRESS AND WORLD WAR II, 1939-1940, maintains that the Seventy-sixth Congress "journeyed through isolationist, internationalist, interventionist, and preparedness stages and enacted three major measures...."[4] The Winter War, he concludes, caused the Congressional shift from the internationalist to the interventionist stage and accounted for the Brown Act, the second of the "three major measures." Porter highlights The Brown Act of 1940, which extended to Finland a twenty million dollar credit for the purchase of non-military supplies, as "the first time the Seventy-sixth Congress authorized a federal agency to intervene directly in a specific European conflict to aid a particular democratic country."[5] Although careful in his research and presentation, Porter places too much symbolical importance on The Brown Act. In 1983, when Wayne S. Cole published his definitive study, ROOSEVELT AND THE ISOLATIONISTS, 1932-45, based on research in more than 100 manuscript collections, he made no mention of The Brown Act and no mention of an impact of the Finnish Winter War on American

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[3] AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW. 66 (July 1961), p. 1086.

[4] David L. Porter, THE SEVENTY-SIXTH CONGRESS AND WORLD WAR II, 1939-1940 (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 185, also p.4.

[5] IBID., p.174.

isolationism.[6]

The Finnish Winter War placed conservatives, liberals, isolationists, and interventionists in a dilemma. Conservatives and isolationists leaned toward aid because of their anti-Soviet feelings and their respect for Finland as a democracy and as the only country that paid its World War I era debt. To support aid, however, meant cooperation with President Franklin D. Roosevelt whom they disliked and distrusted. They feared he later would use a Finnish precedent to aid France and Britain, then engaged in a "phony war" with Germany. Liberals and internationists, on the other hand, feared that providing aid to Finland would detract from possible future aid to France and Britain, their major foreign policy priority. Porter's study, and the study by Travis Beal Jacobs, AMERICA AND THE WINTER WAR, 1939-1940, offer solid narrative regarding this complex component of the formulation of United States foreign policy during the early years of World War II.[7]

Historians who have examined American public opinion present an almost united front regarding the Winter War. Ralph B. Levering, in AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE RUSSIAN ALLIANCE, 1939-1945, concludes that "Except for the DAILY WORKER, probably

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[6] Wayne S. Cole, ROOSEVELT AND THE ISOLATIONISTS, 1932-1945 (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

[7] Travis Beal Jacobs, AMERICA AND THE WINTER WAR, 1939-1940 (New York: Garland, 1981).

every newspaper in America denounced Russia's attack."[8] Jacobs finds that "the religious press unanimously condemned the USSR," and that "nearly everyone on Capitol Hill expressed pro-Finnish or anti-Soviet sentiments...."[9] In his poll of December 14 to 19, 1939, George Gallup found that 88% of Americans sympathized with Finland while only 1% sympathized with the Soviet Union, with 11% neutral or with no opinion.[10]

The only person who could have transformed such exceptional sentiments into aid for Finland was Roosevelt. Porter, for example, concludes that "In retrospect, Congress probably would have complied if Roosevelt had publicly supported direct American military assistance to Finland...."[11] Historians who have analyzed his actions offer different emphases. In their authoritative study, THE CHALLENGE TO ISOLATION, 1937-1940, William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason label Roosevelt's record "unimpressive" regarding aid to Finland.[12]

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[8] Ralph B. Levering, AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE RUSSIAN ALLIANCE, 1939-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), p.32.

[9] Jacobs, AMERICA AND THE WINTER WAR, 1939-1940, p.73.

[10] George H. Gallup, THE GALLUP POLL: PUBLIC OPINION, 1935-1941 (New York: Randon House, 1972), p.197.

[11] Porter, THE SEVENTY-SIXTH CONGRESS, p.176; also see p.126.

[12] William E. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, THE CHALLENGE TO ISOLATION, 1937-1940 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), p.340.

Robert Dallek, in his comprehensive study, FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1932-1945, views Roosevelt's performance more favorably. Dallek plays down the strength of public sympathy for Finland and interprets in a favorable light Roosevelt's refusal to provide strong leadership in the movement to aid Finland. Roosevelt, Dallek points out, was "reluctant to do anything that would drive Moscow into closer cooperation with Berlin" and "believed that pressure for a large armaments loan would revive charges that he intended to involve the country in the war, would undermine his ability to offer guarded assistance to Britain and France, and would weaken his chances for reelection in 1940, if he decided to run again."[13] Dallek and Langer and Gleason presented detailed volumes that included relatively few pages (seven and thrity seven) on Roosevelt and the Winter War.

Jacobs, on the other hand, devoted his entire, well-researched book to the United States and the Winter War. Although even-handed in his judgements, his conclusions question Roosevelt's leadership. In his "Preface" Jacobs notes that presidential speech writer "Robert Sherwood described the autumn and winter of 1939-1940...as the 'one crisis in Roosevelt's career when he was completely at a loss as to what action to take.'" The Winter War illustrates Sherwood's point. Jacob

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[13] Robert Dallek, FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1932-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp.210,209,210.

concludes that Roosevelt just "did not deem Finnish aid sufficiently necessary to exert the influence of the executive branch in Congress." Jacobs reasons that "a demonstration of America's willingness to aid positively the victims of aggression during the Winter War even though it would not have altered the outcome of the Russo-Finnish conflict, might have had a profound impact on the World War."[14]

By focusing initially on Sherwood's analysis of Roosevelt, Jacobs raises a question that Roosevelt's biographers need to examine in greater detail. Did Roosevelt's "loss as to what action to take," affect his thinking, understanding, and actions in other areas. Dallek, unlike Sherwood, Jacobs, and Langer and Gleason, saw a masterful Roosvelt in full command and aware of the nuances of domestic and world conditions. All historians agree, however, that Roosevelt recognized he faced limits when formulating his foreign policies.

James MacGregor Burns, in his well-received, two-volume biography of Roosevelt, does not analyze precisely the President's control over foreign affairs during the winter of 1939-1940. Burns does suggest, however, that Roosevelt "must have felt keenly the hopeless inadequacy of United States aid to the little nation--inadequacy stemming from Hull's caution and

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[14] Jacobs, AMERICA AND THE WINTER WAR,1939-1940 pp.X, 234,238.

from Roosevelt's fear of American isolationists." Other than this sparse assessment, Burns does not consider Roosevelt's leadership in the attempt to aid Finland. Regarding Roosevelt's attitude toward the Soviet Union, Burns paints a picture of Roosevelt more hostile to the Soviet Union than Dallek's portrait. Although the Winter War ended in March 1940, Roosevelt maintained throughout 1940 the "moral embargo" he had proclaimed when the Soviet Union launched its invasion. Burns characterizes United States relations with the Soviet Union throughout 1940 as "remote and unfriendly."[15] Only in January 1941 did Roosevelt lift the embargo as part of an "eleventh hour...counter-coalition to stop the surging Nazis."[16]

The American historian who has written the most sophisticated study of Finnish-American relations is one who lives and teaches in Finland, Michael Berry. His book, AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE FINNISH EXCEPTION: IDEOLOGICAL PREFERENCES AND WARTIME REALITIES, is more than a narrative of American-Finnish relations; it also "introduces a conceptual approach to the examination of American policy toward Finland" and "includes an overview of the dominant prewar idealogical preferences in both countries." Far more than any other historian, Berry

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[15] James MacGregor Burns, ROOSEVELT: THE LION AND THE FOX (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1956), p.415.

[16] James MacGregor Burns, ROOSEVELT: THE SOLDIER OF FREEDOM, 1940-1945 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), p.94.

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stresses the importance of Finnish images in the United States, "not just because they are related to Finland but also because they are associated with important American values and assumptions about how the world should be organized and states should act." Berry places the Winter War in the larger flow of United States history. He points out, for example, that immediately after the war the Treasury Department and the Department of State both drafted plans to help rebuild the Finnish economy, "a prototype 'Marshall Plan' in 1940...."[17] Berry devotes the heart of his book to the period of Finland's Continuation War, but his explorations into the roots of the Finnish-American relations of 1941-1944, offer a framework that yields new insights in understanding America and the Winter War.[18]

Whatever the degree of their differences regarding isolationism, public opinion, and President Roosevelt, all American historians of the Winter War brand the Soviet Union as the aggressor and conclude that America easily perceived the meaning of the conflict. Politicians, journalists, and others who employ analogies and draw lessons from the past have a clear corpus of publications to consult when considering the Winter

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[17] R. Michael Berry, AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE FINNISH EXCEPTION: IDEOLOGICAL PREFERENCES AND WARTIME REALITIES (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1987), pp. 9,35,83.

[18] Although Dallek covers the years to 1945, he mentions neither the Continuation War nor Roosevelt's breaking of diplomatic relations with Finland in June 1944.

War. Few such persons have done so.

II

Each generation uses the past to explain its contemporary conditions and events. In this context, post-World War II American presidents repeatedly have used the September 1938 Munich Conference, and by implication the subsequent German take-over of Czechoslovakia the following March, as well as the German invasion of Poland eleven months after the conference. In his study, THE PUBLIC AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1918-1978, Ralph B. Levering summarized that "What became clear soon after the war was the hold which the Munich analogy had on the thinkikng of President Truman and many other Americans."[19]

On December 15, 1950, for example, President Harry S. Truman explained and defended American military involvement in Korea with the thought that "The world learned from Munich that security cannot be bought by appeasement."[20] On April 4, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower cabled British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to enlist support for American military intervention in Southeast Asia. Eisenhower reminded Churchill

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[19] Ralph B. Levering, THE PUBLIC AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1918-1978 (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1978), p.93.

[20] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: HARRY S. TRUMAN, 1950 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), p.742.

that "we failed to halt Hirohito, Mussolini, and Hitler by not acting in unity and in time. That marked the beginning of many years of stark tragedy and desperate peril. May it not be that our nations have learned something from that lesson?"[21] Four and one half years later, the United States faced another foreign crisis, this time in the Formosan straits. To justify his actions to the nation, Eisenhower asked, "Do we not still remember that the name of 'Munich' symbolizes a vain hope of appeasing dictators.... If history teaches anything, appeasement would make it more likely that we would have to fight a major war."[22] On November 2, 1966, this time regarding American military activity in Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson continued the theme: "I have always believed that the Communist strategists of the fifties were encouraged by the indifference, the fear, and the weakness that permitted the aggression of the thirties to move so far so fast."[23]

When the Soviet Union smashed across the Finnish border on November 30, 1939, the Munich Conference, the later occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the invasion of Poland all were past history.

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[21] Dwight D. Eisenhower, MANDATE FOR CHANGE, 1953-1956 (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), p.347.

[22] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, 1958 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), pp.695,697.

[23] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: LYNDON B. JOHNSON, 1966 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1967), vol. II, p.1290.

Historians, however, when they research American reaction to the Winter War, find that no politician, newspaper, or commentator refered to the lessons of Munich that post World War II presidents offer cited. Following World War II the Soviet Union replaced Germany as the source of American foreign affairs anxieties. American presidents viewed the Soviet Union as an ideologically-driven expansionist power. Levering described their reasoning, "If the United States in dealing with Russia avoided the appeasement which had abetted Hitler's aggression in the late 1930's, than Communism could be contained and World War III could be averted."[24] Logically, presidents could have used the Finnish Winter War as a positive example, in contrast to the negative Munich model, to warn about appeasement. In November 1939, Finland refused to appease the Soviets and, unlike the Czechoslovakia, Finland remained independent.

Post-World War II presidents described world affairs to Americans as a two-sided contest between democracy and communism, between good and evil. In a major speech on foreign policy on March 17, 1948, for example, Truman declared that "The issue is as old as recorded history. It is tyranny against freedom."[25] In his first inaugural address, Eisenhower warned that throughout the world "Freedom is pitted against slavery; lightness against

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[24] Levering, THE PUBLIC AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, p.83.

[25] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: HARRY S. TRUMAN, 1948 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1964), p.188.

the dark."[26] In his inaugural address President John F. Kennedy went even further. He welcomed the responsibility "of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger."[27] At times presidents interpreted specific events to Americans with more complexity, but primarily presidents relied on more simplistic rhetoric. If presidents wanted a sharp contrast between good and evil, they could have found no better example than the Finnish Winter War.

III

Despite the vivid image of a valiant Finland fighting an expansionistic Soviet Union, postwar presidents have avoided mention of the Winter War, and, with a few minor exceptions, they have even avoided mention of Finland. Four factors seemingly account for this avoidance. First, Finland's co-belligerence status with Germany, 1941-1944, tarnished Finland's shiny image. After World War II, moreover, the United States abandoned its alliance with the Soviet Union and adopted a policy of containing Soviet power and influence, while Finland stressed friendly relations with the Soviet Union as the foundation of its foreign policy. In essence, Finland and the United States switched postions regarding the Soviet Union.

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[26] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, 1953 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1960), p.4.

[27] PUBLIC PAPERS OF THE PRESIDENTS OF THE UNITED STATES: JOHN F. KENNEDY, 1961 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1962), p.2.

Historians have found a second reason to explain presidential reticence regarding Finland. In January 1946 the United States approved credits for Finland and continued them despite Finnish refusal, in 1947, to participate in the Marshall Plan. While in his public statements Truman oversimplified conditions in the rest of Europe, he pursued a quiet, cautious, subtle policy toward Finland, aware of the special relationship between that country and the Soviet Union. To draw attention to Finland, Truman and his advisers reasoned, might well alarm the Soviets who then might attempt to pull Finland under its control.[28]

Presdients also avoided mention of Finland in their public statements because Finland and the other Nordic countries fell outside simple characterization. In his Fulton, Missouri speech, in March 1946, Churchill stopped the Iron Curtain at Stetin, on the south shore of the Baltic Sea. North of that sea the concept lost a measure of creditability. A few months later United States Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, William T. Clayton, considered Sweden under Soviet control because the

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[28] For United States view of Finland as an exception, see Geir Lundestad, THE AMERICAN NON-POLICY TOWARDS EASTERN EUROPE, 1943-1947 (Tromso: Universitetsforloget, 1978), pp.285-296, 309-312; Jukka Nevakivi, "Relationship Redefined: Postwar Finnish Neutrality and United States Interests," paper delivered at CONFERENCE ON FINNISH-UNITED STATES DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS, 1919-1989, Washington,D.C., November 8, 1989.

two countries signed a series of bilateral trade agreements. Before they joined NATO, moreover, Norway and Denmark attempted to build bridges between the two super powers and when that proved unsuccessful they considered joining Sweden in establishing a Scandinavian Defense Union.[29]

A fourth reason why presidents refrained from commenting about Finland relates to the third. Finland celebrates its foreign policy, its Paasikivi Line: national independence, friendly relations with the Soviet Union, and neutrality in international affairs. The Paasikivi Line rests on the belief that security, not ideology, motivated Soviet foreign policy and, therefore, a democratic, Christian, free-market, but non-threatening Finland could share peacefully a 788 mile border with its communist neighbor. This relationship, moreover, serves the national interests of both countries. Such a reality contradicts the basic premises of United States foreign policy that ideology fueled Soviet actions and that such actions were expansionistic rather than defensive. To discuss Finland raises questions about these basic premises. No president or secretary of state wished to engage in such discussions.

IV

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[29] For "bridge building" and the Scandinavian Defense Union, see Geir Lundestad, AMERICA, SCANDINAVIA, AND THE COLD WAR, 1945-1940 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), especially pp. 49-63, 92-107, 211-212, 290-295.

The success of Finland's foreign policy became more and more apparent to the world as it joined the Nordic Council, became part of the Nordic Bloc in the United Nations, signed agreements with the European Economic Community and the European Free Trade Area, watched the Soviets relinquish their lease on the Porkkala Peninsula, and maintained friendly relations with all countries. While American presidents remained quiet, journalists and other observers devised the term Finlandization to discredit Finland's success, seemingly because they could not assimilate its reality with their Cold War assumptions. But that, of course, is another story.

American scholars can learn about the Soviet Union by examining Soviet-Finnish relations; American attitude toward Finland, in turn, reveals much about American society and politics. During the Winter War Roosevelt recognized the limits within which he conducted foreign affairs. Postwar presidents, despite their strident rhetoric regarding the Soviet Union, seemed aware they also faced limits in dealing with Finland,26 perhaps a legacy of the Winter War. In dealing with Eastern Europe, however, they seemingly recognized fewer limits. This contradiction should interest historians, but has not. The Finnish Winter War, rather than an isolated, brief conflict in Europe's most remote corner, was an integral part of a broader pattern of European history that continues to the present and has

relevance to a better understanding of American foreign and domestic policies.